

The nature of the beast

A critical discussion of profiling

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The criminologist's inquiry into the causes of crime is complex and multifaceted. The process by which individuals become criminals must be identified; social behaviour in general, and the specific context in which the crime was committed, should receive attention. The study of all crimes involves not only investigations into the motivation of offenders, but also into the roles of victims and bystanders, as well as the physical and social context within which crime takes place. It is with all of these factors in mind that criminologists embark on the arduous task of developing a profile for society's most feared – the serial killer.¹

A criminologist needs to view a criminal event or process holistically. This would include the precursors to the event, including the environmental and situational factors that bring people together in time and space; the event itself; the interaction between the participants and how this influences the outcome of the event; the aftermath of the event, including reporting it to the police and their response; the harm caused to the victim; correctional steps taken; as well as the long-term consequences of the event in respect of public reaction to the event and amendment of laws. The criminal event therefore includes the entire process, including the precursors or precipitating factors, the situation, the course of events and reporting the case, the judicial process and correctional actions.

PROFILING THE SERIAL KILLER

A 2005 FBI Symposium on serial murder came up with the following definition of serial murder:

The unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events.²

The search for a single personality type of serial killer has not yet been fruitful, and is unlikely to bear any fruit. Indeed, psychologists who provide profiles of serial killers who are still at large, based solely on personality variables, are at best engaging in invalidated clinical judgment and unsubstantiated hunches.³ Rather, profile information should be based on the collected knowledge of all sectors of criminology, psychology, sociology, anthropology and psychiatry, as well as from the disciplines of political science, history, and economics.

Criminal profiling is a form of retro-classification, in other words, an attempt at classification by working backwards. It can at best be viewed as a strategy to narrow the field of options and generate educated guesses about the perpetrator. Much profiling is really only guesswork based on hunches and anecdotal information accumulated

through years of experience. It is often full of error and misinterpretation. Furthermore, very rarely does profiling on its own provide the specific identity of the offender – nor should it be intended to. Profiling can merely suggest the kind of person that might have committed the crime under investigation, but certainly not the identity of the specific person. It stands to reason that one can never generalise in these matters – human nature is unique and each person has their own personality make-up.

As such, there is no such thing as a profile of serial killers – no single description that covers all cases and explains who the killers are and why they kill. The behavioural scientists who study serial killers define them narrowly as killers who, over a period of time, slay three or more victims, compelled by an inner drive that finds release only in killing. But given that there are as many kinds of compulsions as there are motives for killing, it follows that there are as many kinds of serial killers as there are motives.

Despite this, serial killers do appear to share some common characteristics. The overwhelming majority have at least average intelligence, most are male (but not all) and they usually suffer from one of two kinds of pathology – they tend to be either psychopaths or psychotics.

A very small minority of serial killers are psychotic; in other words, individuals who fail to perceive reality correctly. Symptoms could include that they hear voices or see visions, or sometimes both. In the case of serial killers suffering from psychosis, murder is a symptom of their madness. David Berkowitz, the infamous ‘Son of Sam’ murderer, who terrorised New York City in the 1970s, was such a killer. However, most serial killers are not insane.

Psychopaths – also labelled sociopaths or antisocial personalities – do not suffer from mental illness but from a character flaw. They have a firm grasp of reality, know right from wrong, and know that killing is wrong. But they simply don’t care. Psychopaths lack a vital component of the human personality that most take for granted

– a conscience. They may have no conscience at all, or it may be the case that their conscience is too weak to inhibit the violence they commit. Psychopaths kill without guilt and without remorse.

No one knows for certain what factors contribute to the creation of a psychopathic killer. Some theories stress genetics – an inborn predisposition to kill. Others favour an environmental explanation; factors in an individual’s upbringing that make him a killer. Many experts believe the truth lies in a combination of genetics and environment – the age-old debate about ‘nature versus nurture’.

Perhaps a psychopathic serial killer’s most frightening quality is his ability to live unnoticed among fellow humans. He appears normal. He may even be intelligent and charming – and probably has to be to enable him to lure his victims. Ted Bundy, who killed countless young women, was this sort of psychopath. Two traits are often present in psychopathic killers: a sexual abnormality (as written about extensively by Dr Miki Pistorius), and an all-consuming need for power. Killing may satisfy such killers sexually, and at the same time it satisfies their need for control – the ultimate control over life and death. Simply put, killing gives them pleasure. They kill because they want to. They kill because they can and because they like it.

WHAT MOTIVATES THE SERIAL KILLER?

The more one considers the typological problems serial killers raise, the more it becomes clear that not all serial killers can be labelled as easily as the above discussion suggests. Very often the motives of serial killers are not clear at all, and these motives vary between serial killers. There have been attempts made by criminologists to classify serial murderers into a typology based on motive. Four major types were identified:

- Visionary type – which would include those who are for example operating on the basis of a ‘directive from God’
- Mission orientated type – those who believe

there is a particular group of people that must be destroyed or eliminated

- The hedonistic type – those who strive for pleasure and thrill seeking, and feel that people are objects that can be used for their own enjoyment. They gain considerable pleasure from the murder event itself
- The power/control type – those who strive to get satisfaction by having complete life and death control over the victim. Sexual components may or may not be present, but the primary motive is extreme power over the helpless victim

Later, two more types were added to the list:

- Recognition seeker – killing primarily for the challenge of it and for the recognition the killer receives from the media, and
- Material gain-seeker, who kills serially for money and material rewards – for instance women killing their husbands for the insurance monies or doctors killing patients whom they know had mentioned them in their wills⁴

A problem we as psychologists and police officers have to face, is that much of what we know about serial killers is gained through interviews conducted with them after they have been incarcerated, which severely limits what we can know. Imprisonment changes people dramatically – they become institutionalised, manipulate and say what they believe you as researcher would like to hear. The person who committed the crimes has changed, often completely, and the researcher must at all times be aware of that fact.

SERIAL KILLERS, OR NOT?

Finally, there are several current examples of cases that fall outside the traditional classification of serial killer, but which should cause us to pause for thought:

The media has recently reported extensively on the case of Chinese manufacturers that were found

guilty of wilfully adding melamine to baby food – while knowing it would kill. Two manufacturers responsible were in fact sentenced to death for their role in the contamination. They killed more than three babies over a period of time, implying that according to the definition of a serial killer, they would qualify as such. Their motive was clearly greed. Should they be labelled as serial killers?

Likewise, Eugene be Kock was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison for causing, over a period of time, the deaths of many political opponents during apartheid. His killings were certainly not motivated by anything remotely sexual. A need for power, maybe? Or was he simply acting on the command of his superiors? Should he, and others who were never prosecuted but who were responsible for similar atrocities, be considered serial killers?

Finally, think about taxi and bus drivers who have no apparent regard for human life – and who cause multiple accidents over a period of time in which people lose their lives. Are they perhaps psychopaths or serial killers?

We could extend this list of questions almost infinitely to include those who order mass killings; people in leadership positions who exercise enormous control over their followers and ‘inspire’ them to commit murder. History is filled with examples – Stalin, Hitler, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Robert Mugabe; to name but a few. Are the soldiers who commit mass bloodshed on the behalf of these men merely soldiers – or are they themselves deadly serial killers?

The question is: where we should draw the line? To this there are no easy answers.

NOTES

- 1 This paper was read at a Southern Business School seminar on serial killings, held at the Monash University (SA) on 17 February 2009.
- 2 R Morton (ed), Serial murder – multi-disciplinary perspectives for investigators, Behaviour Analysis Unit, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime,

http://www.fbi.gov/publications/serial_murder.htm, 2005,
(accessed 6 March 2009).

3 C Bartol, *Criminal behaviour: a psycho-social approach*,
New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995.

4 Ibid.